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# Iraq Adds Complexity To U.S., Syria Relations

As Washington Sanctions Damascus,

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MOSUL, Iraq -- While the House of Representatives was voting to adopt a new raft of Syrian sanctions in Washington last week, here in northern Iraq the 101st Airborne Division was doing everything in its power to burnish economic relations with Syria.

"It's the freest trade there has ever been here," said Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne's 22,000 troops, in an Oct. 10 war room briefing for U.S. visitors involved in the campaign to promote American achievements in Iraq. He proudly called for the next slide, an image from the day the Iraq-Syria frontier post opened for business. It featured a Syrian border monument with a huge picture of that nation's late president, Hafez al-Assad.

Mr. Assad's son Bashar is now Syria's head of state, and the sanctions, headed for the Senate, are meant to punish Damascus until the U.S. says it has stopped sponsoring terrorism.

But the burgeoning relationship between Syria and American-controlled northern Iraq illustrates a divergence of interests between Middle Eastern priorities in Washington and the more immediate, on-the-ground needs of the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq, who seek to bring Iraqis the jobs and prosperity they view as a key step in ending attacks on U.S. forces.

"Our No. 1 problem is unemployment," said Gen. Petraeus, who has noted a falling-off in supplies of discretionary funds that his officers use to keep projects going forward in his area of responsibility. He has spent \$28 million so far and says he needs more. "The north has the military forces it needs," he said. "All we need is money."

Spurring the local economy is a critical element in Gen. Petraeus's campaign, and he has used his funds to restart a long-dormant asphalt factory, uncap local oil wells and work to bring irrigation to a new area of wheat fields.

Gen. Petraeus didn't say whether he had had friction with the civilian U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority in Baghdad over his relationship with the Syrians. An officer of the 101st said its general practice was not to confront the CPA but to do what they thought best and "apologize later rather than seek permission first." CPA officials said they had no comment on the wider question of trade with Syria, which also takes place elsewhere in Iraq, since no new U.S. sanctions were yet in force.



But trade is vital to this city of 1.7 million and the surrounding region, and one of Gen. Petraeus's first priorities upon taking control of the north was to open the Turkish and Syrian borders. Now, he said, some 500 to 700 trucks arrive from Syria each day, paying a toll of \$10 for a pickup and \$20 for a bigger rig. He has also pioneered easy, visa-free travel between Mosul province, home to about 12% of Iraq's 25 million people, and the neighboring Syrian region.

To help Iraq cope with its huge electricity deficit, the general dreamed up a scheme to buy

power from Syria in return for Iraqi oil. Speeding the process with his fleet of helicopters, he brought together officials from Damascus, men from the new ministries in Baghdad and the best of the 60 lawyers in his own force to hammer out a deal.

Negotiations dragged on, and the general feared they would collapse over bureaucratic details. To break the logjam, he proposed that his engineers swing open the valves on the Iraqi oil-export pipeline, the Syrians switch on the power lines, and the haggling proceed at leisure over the exact final price. Everyone agreed.

Six weeks later, the informal arrangement appears to be working well, Gen. Petraeus said, even if the power from Syria represents well under 10% of local production.

Security hasn't been neglected. Some 800 border guards have been retrained and set up at the old border post to keep an eye out for Islamist and other Arab fighters, some of them Syrian, who have been slipping over the border to attack U.S. troops. But on the tables of Mosul, breakfast now includes Syrian apricot jam.

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